Promotion Board Tips

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN M. MITCHELL

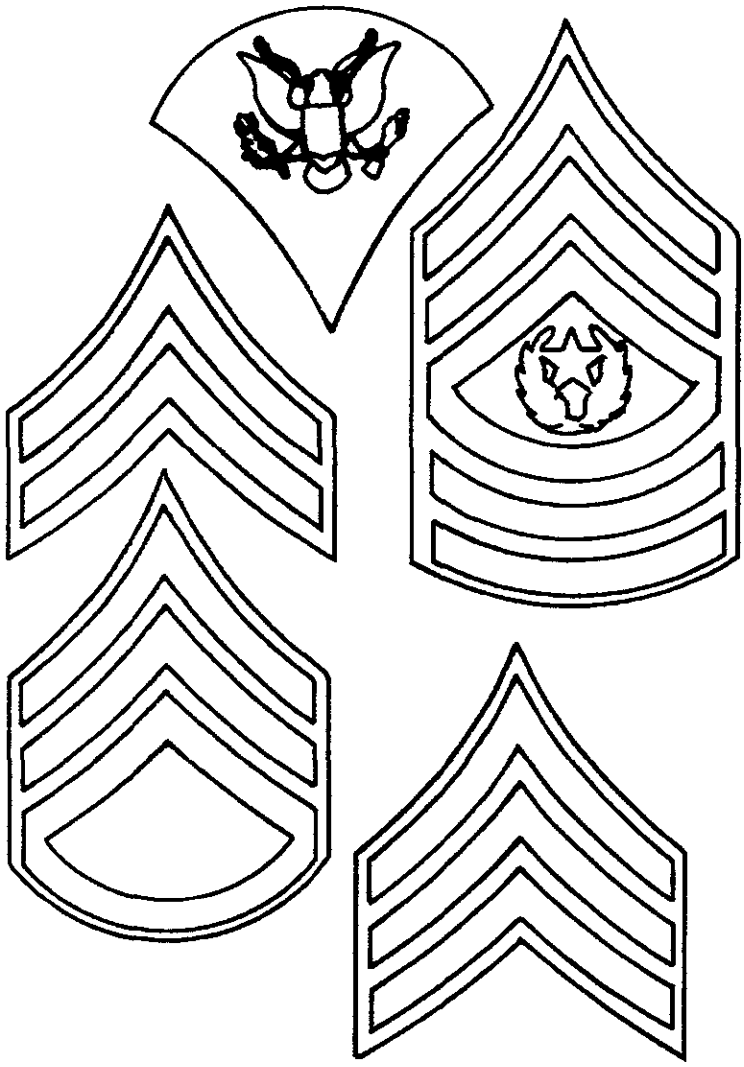
The first exposure to service on a Department of the Army promotion board can be an eye-opening experience. In my case, it came in the form of the calendar year 1992 Master Sergeant Selection Board, at the end of my 18th year of service, following battalion command. I want to share some observations that may help soldiers prepare themselves for promotion, and help commanders better manage their noncommissioned officers' personal and professional development.

It is important to recognize that no two boards produce exactly the same results. This is partly because the membership of the board changes from year to year, and equally important, instructions from the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel change annually. The demographics of the eligible population and the needs of the Army at the time also directly affect the results. So, while it may be possible to generalize some lessons from one year to the next, it's important not to rely too heavily on the specifics of a particular board's results.

My overwhelming impression is that the current system of centralized promotion is very fair. The Office of the Secretary of the Army, which is charged with overseeing the administration of each such board, goes to great lengths to assemble a board composed of officers and senior noncommissioned officers who have the military experience to make good choices.

In the case of the master sergeant selection board, the members were command sergeants major, lieutenant colonels, and colonels. There was a mix of serving battalion and brigade commanders, command sergeants major at various levels of command, and former commanders. Ethnic groups and women were represented as well. The board was organized into panels composed of four to eight members, to consider specific career management fields (CMF). Without going into the details of the voting, I will simply say that it was extremely well-organized, and each panel had a dedicated (non-voting) administrative NCO who kept track of records and votes.

Now to the specific issues. Since I served on the Infantry/Special Forces panel, many of my observations will refer to those career management fields (CMFs 11 and 18). In general, we saw a number of outdated photographs (five years or older) and Personnel Qualification Records that had not been reviewed. An old photograph leaves the board members wondering why the soldier chose not to update it, and may cause them to look closer at the height, weight, and body fat data. We also



noticed more than a few cases of soldiers who had gained weight over the years and as their weight climbed toward their maximum allowable screening weight, their height in inches had also increased. This is easy to trace on the noncommissioned officer-efficiency reports (NCOERs), and it gives the impression that the unit is not enforcing good quality control on either height and weight screening or the preparation of NCOERs. Many such reports also featured the "bullet" comment, "Soldier is within body fat standards in accordance with AR 600-9." Such a bullet alone was not convincing, as it was hard to believe that the Army has so many superior athletes who are over their screening weight by 10 to 30 pounds. If a soldier falls into that category, his rater should reinforce the standard line with a bullet comment that explains his athletic achievements.

For a sergeant first class, successful performance as a platoon sergeant (or in the case of MOS 11C, section sergeant in the mortar platoon of mechanized or armor units), was a critical indicator of preparation. There was no such thing as "too much time" as a platoon sergeant, and where there was opportunity, successful service as a company first sergeant was a good indicator of potential. Present or recent platoon sergeant duty weighed more heavily with the panel members than did a short period several years earlier (often as a staff sergeant), with one or more intervening assignments away from TOE units.

There was a strong preference for solid performance in "line" units over the many other opportunities offered to our soldiers. This means that battalion commanders and their command sergeants major need to screen each inbound sergeant first class to decide if he needs to go directly to a platoon sergeant job. There seem to be enough sergeants first class serving in units now who have three or more years as platoon sergeants and who could make major contributions in the staff NCO positions at battalion and brigade level, thus making room for others who need experience.

Assignments "away from troops" take many forms, varying from drill sergeant duty, to recruiting, to Reserve Officer Training Corps, to Reserve Component advisor, to instructor duty in a service school or NCO Academy, to service on a high level staff or with an Army test activity. While these are all professionally broadening assignments, they often contribute little to the soldier's preparation to serve as a master sergeant—and principally as a company first sergeant. Recognizing that good soldiers are often recruited and involuntarily assigned to such duty, the best course is to do the job professionally, stay the required period, and return to a TOE unit. For combat arms soldiers, the risks seem to be particularly high in recruiting and ROTC assignments, where in most cases, they have their first contact with women in a duty environment. Tour extensions or successive assignments to those "non-troop" billets (except in the most extreme compassionate cases) give the impression that the soldier is avoiding the more challenging jobs.

Education and training are increasingly important to soldiers as they progress in their Army careers. Sergeants first class were expected to have successfully completed the Advanced NCO Course for their CMF. Failure to graduate from a military course of instruction for other than medical or compassionate reasons was not looked upon favorably. We immediately looked for evidence that he had returned and completed the course. Any adverse comments on his academic efficiency reports were read closely.

Additional skill courses were an enhancer, but not a major factor in our evaluation of the soldier's training. Where they apply directly to the soldier's duty, they carried more weight than did those which were simply "qualifications."

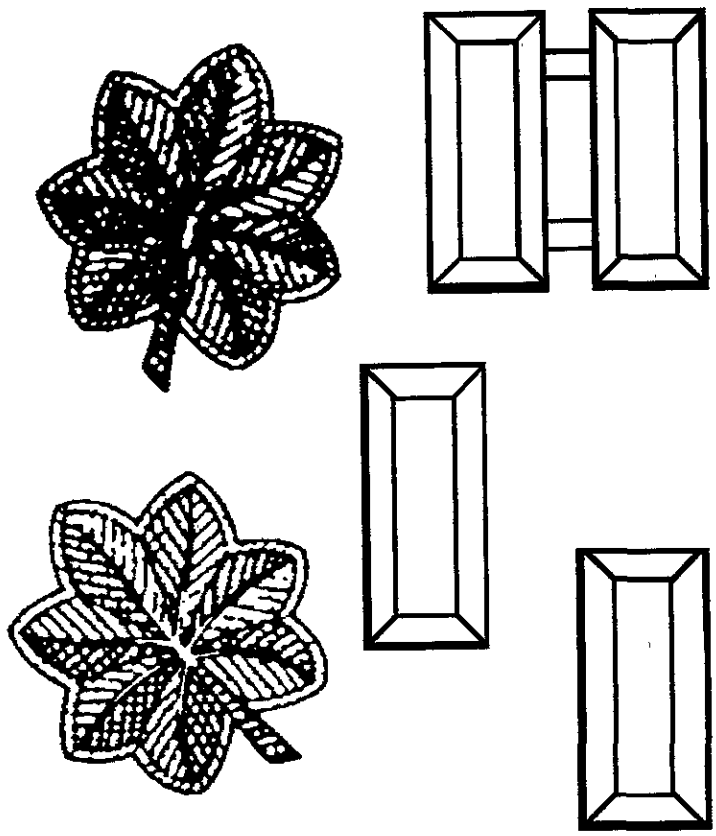
Like military education and training, civilian education was a matter of interest to the board members. Many soldiers had evidence of some college credits, but a surprising number did not. Generally, soldiers with a great deal of service in TOE units had less college education. Setting aside the obvious conflicts between field duty and evening college classes, there are still ample opportunities to get college credits by testing or by evaluation of military training and experience. Some Department of Defense courses (such as the Equal Opportunity Advisor Course, for example) confer direct college-level credits; many others can be evaluated and can produce college credits for educational content. Infantrymen and Special Forces soldiers, in general, need to visit their installation education centers and get credits posted to their records. Those serving in assignments "away from troops" should take advantage of more predictable hours and enroll in college courses. For example, there should be no excuse for a soldier leaving an ROTC assignment without having earned some college credits.

In the matter of NCOERs, we found the current form with the bullet comments very easy to review. Raters and senior raters need to continue to work to produce direct, clear, and substantive statements. The more specific the comment, the more value and credibility it had. A company commander's comment, "The best platoon sergeant in my company," was always superior to the platoon leader's, "An outstanding super-soldier." One key to success in reviewing NCOER's is making sure the person who made the comment was qualified to do so. For example, a company first sergeant cannot credibly state that a particular platoon sergeant is "the best in the battalion," while a battalion commander can. Also, while "Success" marks on the backside of the NCOER do not require bullet comments, they do help the board members assess the quality of performance if they are specific and relevant.

Adverse actions that occur during the rated period should be included in the NCOER. The most frequent omissions of this sort are reliefs for cause and letters of reprimand that were filed for misconduct. Since both items typically appear in the soldier's performance microfiche, the absence of any reference to performance problems (on or off duty) gives the impression that the chain of command is trying to conceal the incident. Certainly, in the "whole soldier" approach, anything significant enough to be filed in the Official Military Personnel File (OMPF) should be acknowledged in the NCOER. In the final analysis, the decision to omit any reference in the NCOER only causes the soldier's file to get a closer look by the board, to see what else the chain of command may have chosen not to mention.

Letters from the eligible soldier to the president of the board were fairly common. When they served the purpose of forwarding items that had not otherwise been posted to the OMPF, they were useful. When a letter had been used as a forum to argue why a soldier should be promoted and what an outstanding record he had compiled, it did not work to his advantage. The best rule on letters to the president of the board is, don't write them—let the record speak for itself.

While it is still true that a soldier is his own best career manager, there are several things the chain of command



can and should do to place him in the best posture for the board. Besides making sure that he is placed in the challenging jobs that prepare him for the increased responsibility of being a company first sergeant and rating him accurately and clearly, commanders and sergeants major need to force the issue of updating photos and personnel qualification records. They can also push civilian education and send soldiers back to military courses they have failed, after the proper re-training. With a little more emphasis on these and the other items mentioned here, we can better prepare more of our senior soldiers for the tougher jobs that lie ahead.

Lieutenant Colonel John M. Mitchell recently completed an assignment in the Directorate of Operations and Training at the Infantry School and is now attending the Army War College. He commanded the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry in Korea. He is a 1973 ROTC graduate of the University of Tennessee and holds a master's degree from Central Michigan University.

SWAP SHOP

SAND TABLE STRING DRILL

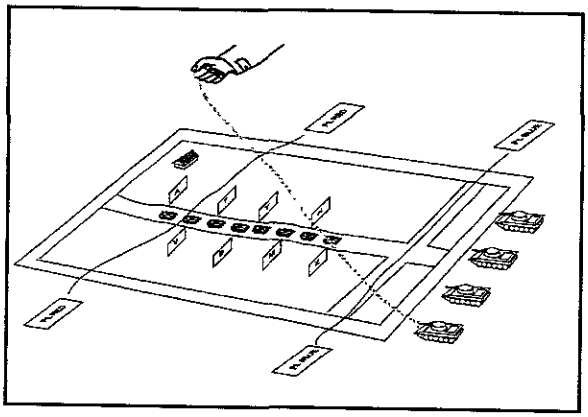
Countless after-action reviews from the combat training centers, along with experiences in Southwest Asia, highlight the problems associated with fire control and distribution. Gunnery manuals and unit SOPs provide the tactics, techniques, and procedures for engaging multiple targets, but putting these theories into practice can be a challenge.

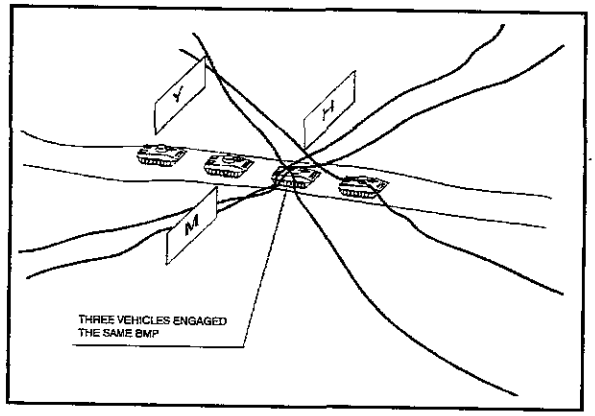
A good training technique is the sand table string drill. First, you will need a sand table (4'x8'), colored yarn, 3x5 index cards, and some simulated enemy targets (rocks, blocks of wood, models). Then proceed as follows:

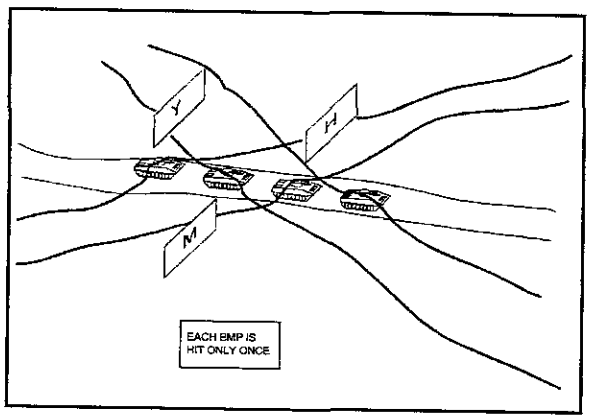
- Make a terrain layout showing only such basic terrain features as hills, buildings, and roads. Give each gunner a piece of yarn that stretches from his position to the opposite side of the terrain board.
- Develop a target scenario. A good starter scenario is an engagement against a column of enemy vehicles moving along a road. Arrange the targets and put a 3x5 card marked with a letter or number next to each potential target. This allows each crew to positively identify its target. Phase lines (PLs) and target reference points (TRPs) should also be clearly marked.
- Issue a fragmentary order (FRAGO) that identifies fire control measures and engagement criteria. For example, the platoon leader designates fields of fire, identifies TRPs, and describes how he plans to fight the position.
- The platoon leader issues an appropriate fire command. For the example above, assume that the unit is a mechanized infantry platoon in a hasty defensive position. The platoon leader gives a fire command such as, "Delta, this is Delta 25, 8 BMPs, direct front, depth, fire!" Each vehicle commander or gunner then selects the first two targets to engage and records the letter or number on the card next to each.

After target selection, have each vehicle commander identify the first of his two targets. As each target is identified, place the yarn across it (Figure 1), and continue this until each vehicle commander has engaged two targets.

Often, two or three crews in a platoon will engage the same enemy vehicle (Figure 2). But with a little practice and SOP refinement, they will be able to kill more enemy vehicles more quickly with fewer rounds (Figure 3). A few minutes on the sand table can help save precious training ammunition and possibly lives on the battlefield.







(Submitted by Captain Theodore D. Martin, Training Management Division, Combined Arms Command, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.)